The Swiss Settlement of Highland, Illinois

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Eleven people began the settlement which is present-day Highland, Illinois. These were eleven people who were brave enough to start a new life and welcome the chance of failure. Needless to say, the settlers began the colony on nothing more than dreams and aspirations. Highland came from modest beginnings, with no more than a log cabin and large meadows. As these daring people persisted through troubles they faced, a small city grew. This city continued to grow and flourish throughout the 1800s and 1900s. These eleven people created a society that soon became a mainstay of the Swiss life, as well as a thriving community in the western United States—both dreams of the settlers. The Swiss brought aspects of their home lives to Illinois, and were able to transform a colony with humble beginnings to a bustling city full of new ideas, industries, and people.

In 1831, a Swiss man, Dr. Caspar Koepfli, read a book by a German immigrant describing his life in Missouri. Koepfli became very interested in this "new country" for reasons unknown, and decided he wanted to lead a colony of his own men to America. Therefore, in April, 1831 Koepfli lead 14 other Swiss to America to pursue the dream of establishing a Swiss settlement in the western United States. Once they reached St. Louis, they began searching for land to settle. They came across Looking Glass Prairie, the area where Highland is presently located, on a trip through Illinois. After buying this land, Koepfli said that he was sure he had found what he had been looking for. However, there were people who doubted Koepfli's intentions to form a Swiss colony in the

western United States. One settler called him foolish and thought it horrible to seclude themselves in the middle of a prairie, instead of with civilized people. Only 11 Swiss people made the move to Looking Glass Prairie, which they quickly named New Switzerland, later to become Highland.

Two important families in the early years of New Switzerland were the McAlellys and the Reynolds, both non-Swiss families already living in the area. The McAlellys occupied two log cabins, but moved out once the Swiss arrived. They were not the most helpful people, and caused problems among the settlers. However, once they left, their cabins were used by the settlers. The Reynolds lived a mile north of the settlement, and offered help and advice. The Reynolds were a main reason New Switzerland prospered.

After the Swiss settled, they wrote letters home to attract more people to come. However, the Swiss lied about the land and did not mention any of the hardships they faced thus far in the letters; the next year more immigrants came, but were disappointed upon arrival. In turn, they wrote letters back to Switzerland, revealing the true state of their new settlement. But, the population kept growing, and therefore the leaders of the community decided to plat the land. This attracted much attention to the settlement, and people around the area came to see the new addition to the community. However, some had ulterior motives for coming; they wanted to see first hand the "queer habits and funny language" of the Swiss folk. Regardless, the platting led to more letters being sent home describing the new improvements of the settlement. More settlers came in the years 1839 and 1840, which brought the population up to 120 by 1841. This also led to a change of name from New Switzerland to Highland in hopes of becoming "more American" but still representing Switzerland.

As the city of Highland grew, more industries arose. Following the platting of the land, specialized industries appeared everywhere: wagon-making, a bakery, specialty stores, a hotel, a postmaster, shoemaking, wood-carving, and a brickyard. At that time in Illinois, most bustling cities also had a major industry to attract foreigners to their home. Therefore Joseph Suppinger, an original settler and leader, wanted to create a steam mill. This building was completed in 1839 and became a facet of Highland for 90 years. The steam mill attracted more people, therefore helping to increase the population in the area. The number of children increased as well, so in 1839 Suppinger helped to create a schoolhouse, the first such place in Highland. As more industries were created and the population grew, Highland began to resemble a bustling American city. Highland continued on its path of evolution and constant growth, becoming a prominent city in southern Illinois.

The Swiss immigrants made Highland distinctive with their own customs and ideas. Those aspects of Swiss life have stayed in Highland even today. Some things that are still the same are the layout of the town—with the same street names and blocks, and a park in the center—which is still used by Highland children. The first settlers of this area also were influential during wars. Farming is another aspect of Swiss life that is still around Highland today; the outskirts of the city are rows of corn. Another lasting effect of the Swiss was their religion. The first settlers were of Christian background, which still predominates today. Lastly are the personality characteristics that the members of Highland possess and most remind one of the early Swiss settlers. Seemingly instinctive, the people of Highland have the same ingenuity, competence, and willingness to carry their own weight that helped to create the society in which they live. All the diversity the

Swiss people brought to America, and more importantly Illinois, has helped to shape a multicultural home for all its inhabitants. Those brave 11 people came to fulfill their dream, but were able to leave a lasting impression still felt today on their settlement of Highland, and on Illinois. [From Betty S. Coats and Raymond J. Spahn, *The Swiss on Looking Glass Prairie a Century and a Half, 1831-1981*; Robert C. Gerling, *Highland*; Solomon Koepfli, *The Settling of Highland*; Kaspar Kopfli and Johann Jacob Eggen, *New Switzerland in Illinois*; and A. P. Spencer, *100 Years 1837-1937 Highland, Illinois*.]